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ABSTRACT

This booklet addresses the issue of special occasions and how they are celebrated. It presents three lists of celebrations: those that focus on young children and have meaning for them; those that parents may choose and therefore are likely to acknowledge diversity among families, races, religions, classes and cultures; and those that the early childhood staff suggest which usually mirror religious or commercial events promoted by society. Some accounts of how teachers celebrate the following in their centers are included and provide examples of how Christmas, cultural differences, birthdays, and Fathers' and Mothers' Day are celebrated in several early childhood programs. One teacher describes some of the milestones of childhood which she celebrates: losing a tooth, success with a skill, having grandparents come to stay, the wonder of nature, and the sponsoring of a child. The characteristics of child-centered celebrations are discussed and the question, "Who is in Charge of These Celebrations?" is considered. (BAC)

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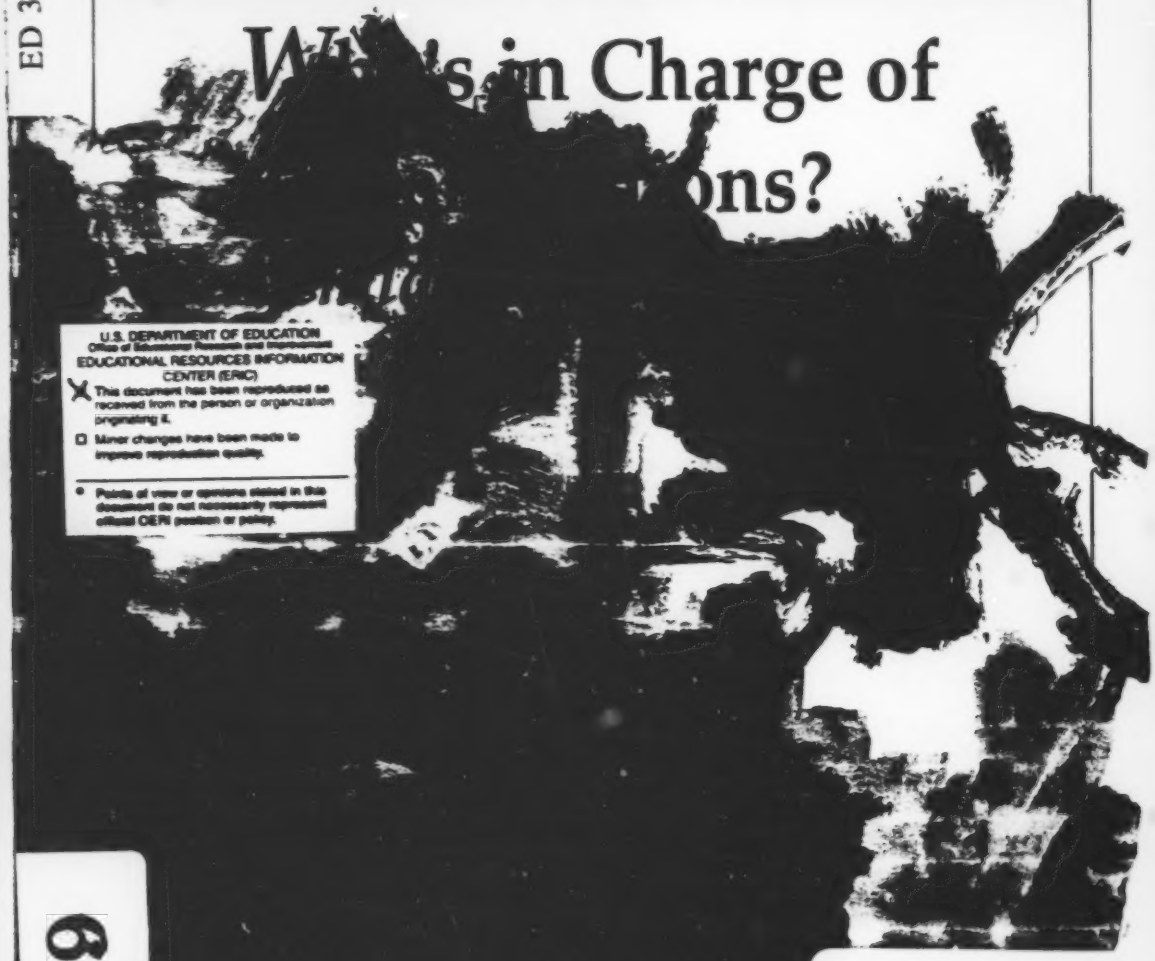

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Who's in Charge of Celebrations?

A child centred approach

Barbara Creaser
&
Elizabeth Dau

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Sometimes people ask me,
'Aren't you lonely
out there -
with just
desert
around you?'

I always look at them...
surprised.
And I say,
'How could I be lonely?
I'm the one
In charge of celebrations.'

I put
myself
in charge.
I choose
my own.

I keep a notebook
and I write the date
and then I write about
the celebration.

It has to be something
I plan to remember
the rest of my life.

From Baylor, B. (1986) I'm In Charge of Celebrations.

Who's in Charge of Celebrations in Your Service?

The children?

The parents?

The staff?

The curriculum books full of holiday crafts?

The advertisers and stores that sell greeting cards, gifts and decorations?

If the children were in charge of celebrations, what might they choose to celebrate?

What celebrations may have meaning for children and what celebrations are developmentally appropriate for them? If early childhood staff are challenged to think about these questions, a list like this one soon emerges:

a new baby in the family

grandparents coming to stay

learning to skip

a new pet

losing the first tooth, a new tooth

going on a trip

a birthday, name day

beginning school

a wedding in the family

visiting relatives overseas, interstate

the first time they can turn the pedals on a bike

learning to whistle...and the list goes on.

Celebrations for young children should focus on young children, what is important for them and their first-hand experiences, and this can mean events important to the individual child or their family.

Celebrating...a new baby

Celebrating...grandparents

If the parents were in charge of celebrations, what might they choose to celebrate?

Celebrations in early childhood settings should acknowledge diversity among families, races, religions, classes and cultures. Following an anti-bias approach:

we need to recognise the diversity that exists within Australia and within our settings. As early childhood educators we should help children to become aware of the many differences between people, differences in:

- *culture*
- *race*
- *beliefs*
- *language*
- *lifestyle*
- *age*
- *ability and*
- *gender.*

(Derman-Sparks quoted in Arthur et al.1993)

It should also be realised that what is worthy of celebration in one family may warrant chastisement in another. Staff who are aware of the differences find themselves worrying about what non-religious families might think of religious festivals, who John can give his Father's Day present to because there are no males in his immediate family, or whether birthdays or name-days or both should be acknowledged for some of the children.

If there are children in your service who honour celebrations not 'traditional' in this country a starting point should be discussion with parents of those children. Staff need to ask parents:

- What does the family celebrate?
- How do they celebrate?
- Is it something that could and/or should be celebrated in this particular early childhood service?
- Is the celebration appropriate for the age group?

If it is a celebration that parents wish acknowledged and it is seen as appropriate for the age group, then staff might consider how they can involve the parents so that staff and parents work together. They thus share the expertise that staff have in child development and the understanding that parents have of this particular celebration. If the celebration isn't viewed as appropriate for a group of children it should still be acknowledged with the individual child or children, letting them know that you are aware that this is an important time for them and their families.

> *Remember, when discussing families and celebrations with children, the purpose is to celebrate every child's family and how they celebrate together, no matter how big or small, how familiar or unique. Through these experiences, children share an important piece of themselves and learn how to respect and appreciate their own families - and those of others.*
> (Church, 1992:46)

If the staff were in charge of celebrations, what would they celebrate?

When groups of early childhood staff are asked this question the following list emerges very quickly:

Christmas

Easter

Australia Day

Mothers' Day

Fathers' Day

Halloween

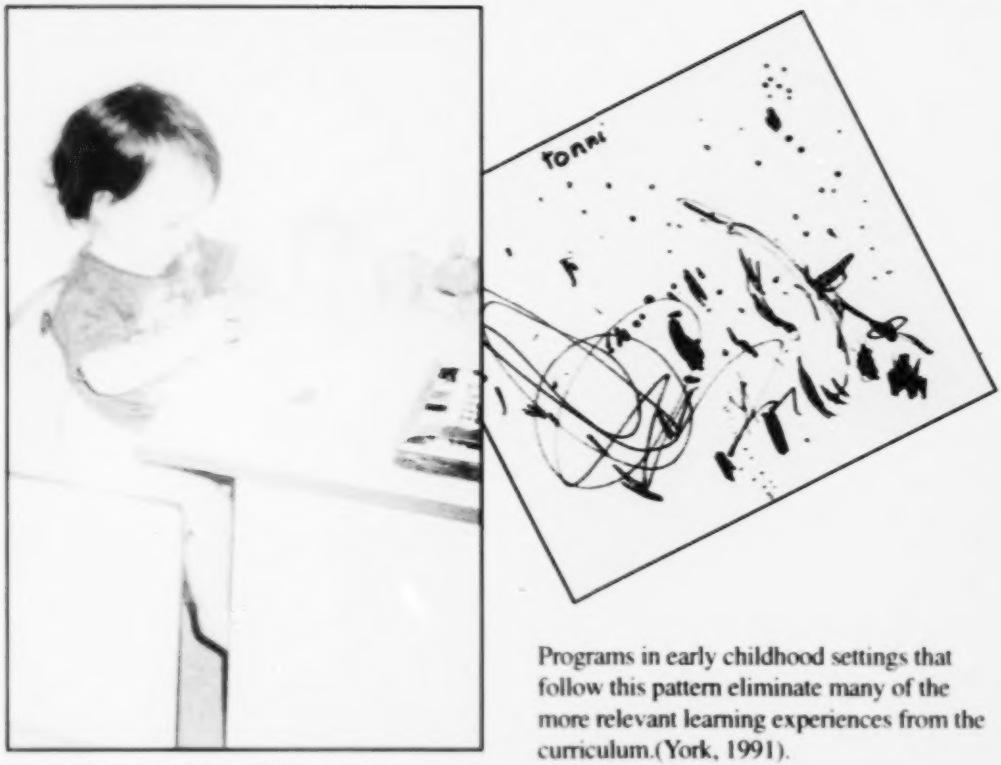
Melbourne Cup

Valentine's Day

When we look at what is celebrated in early childhood settings it is very often easy to see a parallel with what the shops and the media tell us to celebrate. In each case it has to do with commercial promotion.

Many early childhood programs mirror the commercial events promoted throughout the year by our society. Greeting card companies, shops and the media carry the consumer population from one commercial event to the next.

Celebrating...first steps



Celebrating...first marks

Programs in early childhood settings that follow this pattern eliminate many of the more relevant learning experiences from the curriculum.(York, 1991).

Often the full and accurate meanings of many of the celebrations that take place in services are not understood by the adults, let alone the children. The stories and meanings, if they were accurately told, would be considered totally unsuitable for children under five years of age and the celebration developmentally inappropriate.

It seems that what is known about how children learn is often ignored. Piaget (1962) claimed that young children learn best when they can build new knowledges, skills and attitudes on prior knowledge, skills and attitudes. Many of the traditional celebrations are far removed from children's prior understanding.

A teacher when presenting a story of a celebration may present the whole picture, but there is potential for children to pick up on only one aspect because that particular aspect has meaning that can be attached to prior knowledge or experience. One example of this may be the story of Australia Day which when presented to a group of young children could impress one child because the Aborigines were depicted without clothes. This could occur because this child has learned through prior experience that to be naked attracts only a negative response.

This story is also inappropriate because young children...'have inaccurate notions of time and space. Historical and geographical concepts are usually lost...' (Clark et al., 1992, p.7)

Staff may also neglect to consider what the children might assign importance to, or what might have the major impact for them. A reminder of some of the words that young children substitute in carols and hymns should tell us that they have understood something quite different from the original meaning.

Some Teachers Explain: What We Do In Our Service...About Christmas

For some people the celebration of Christmas is very important. For some it is a time when families celebrate being together and for some it is an important religious festival.

On the other hand, some families don't celebrate Christmas. As Dimidjian (1989, p.70) points out, '...Christmas is at root a religious holiday the observance of which is alien, sometimes even offensive, to non-Christians. Easter poses the same dilemma...'

Can staff in early childhood settings let children celebrate Christmas in a way that is meaningful for them? Do staff have a right to impose on children, and their families, the way they should celebrate Christmas - if in fact their family does celebrate?

Patrick

> *Staff of our centre feel very strongly that we should protect children from all the commercialism of Christmas, from the bombardment that they get from the shopping centres and the television. Well, perhaps you can't protect children from that but our centre can be a refuge from it.*

Think about the celebration of Christmas. Have the staff in your service considered families who:

- Have low incomes and may be stressed by the pressures to BUY?
- Have experienced the loss of a family member by death or separation and Christmas rekindles this loss?
- Don't celebrate Christmas because it is outside their religion and or culture?
- Stress the religious rather than the commercial aspect?
- Feel excluded because they don't have the stereotypical togetherness that is presented so often in the media.

So what happens in Patrick's centre at Christmas time?

Patrick

> *It's easier for me to talk about what doesn't happen because what does happen is determined by the children. We don't have Santa Claus visit because if parents want their children to see Santa there are hundreds of opportunities - he's everywhere, at every shopping centre. We don't have decorations around the centre or a Christmas tree. We believe that's for home if families choose to have these. Generally we don't mention Christmas unless the children do and then we are very careful not to talk about it in a way that suggests it is the same for all families.*

We do make a point of celebrating with individual children - never in a whole group situation though - that perhaps grandparents are coming for Christmas or that they are going to see someone special.

We have a collage trolley, writing trolley and painting and drawing area that is always accessible to the children. At Christmas time we put some different materials out for the children so that, for example if a child says, 'I want to make a card for my Mum', then we can suggest they have a look at the new red and green paper on the writing trolley or some other material that may have been put there. Generally they don't even ask because they have access to this area and are happy to explore and choose from it themselves.

We do have one event organised by the staff, and the older children are always encouraged to make suggestions, and that is a family picnic. We don't celebrate Christmas in what has become the traditional way in many early childhood settings, and parents know the reasons why and are supportive, but we do celebrate the year we've all had together - and there are lots of things to celebrate!

How do the parents accept the way that the centre celebrates Christmas?

We always make it clear at the initial interview that it is centre policy to celebrate events that are part of the daily lives of the children and not the big deal festivals of the commercial world. They are given examples of our subjects of celebrations and they make the choice to send their children here knowing that we keep celebrations small and low key. It does not mean that we don't acknowledge important events, but we highlight events on a much more individual basis and we may acknowledge the event for one child by making two or three children aware but not the whole group.

...About Cultural Differences

Andrea

We have a multicultural program in our centre so we celebrate lots of holidays that other cultures celebrate.

We need to be very thoughtful about the ways in which these celebrations are addressed. As Ramsey (1987, p.80) says, 'national holidays are by definition ethnocentric. They glorify the past events and future potential of a particular country and in some cases a specific group within that country'.

This phenomenon is particularly true of Australia Day which celebrates the European 'discovery and settling' of Australia. This holiday tends to focus on the heroism of the European and ignores or does not honestly present the picture for Aboriginal people. While Australia Day celebrates Britain's first foothold on the Australian continent it often ignores what it meant for many Aborigines - the end of their way of life, the death of many of their people and their removal from the land. (This example is based on a similar one relating to Thanksgiving in the United States given by Ramsey, 1987, p.81.)

In efforts to represent other cultures and their celebrations to children, we often stereotype and trivialize those cultures so that children learn inaccurate information, such as all Aborigines live in wiltjas, or all Chinese wear coolie hats, or all Italians eat spaghetti.

These misunderstandings are the basis for much of the bias which will develop in children unless we make efforts to help children value differences in all forms.

Celebrations may be a legitimate component of a multicultural program but there are a number of questions that staff should consider:

Is this celebration appropriate to my group of children?

Does historical/traditional information mean anything to young children?

Is it directly related to their daily lives?

Is there an assumption that ethnic groups will celebrate the same holiday and in the same way?

Celebrating...multiculturalism

Does the celebration portray groups of people in stereotypical ways?

If staff think carefully about the issues raised then the celebrations in their services have the potential to promote an awareness of diversity and to go beyond this to help 'children to understand, accept and value diversity in all its forms' (Arthur et al., 1993, p.32).

...About Birthdays

Amelita

- *We always celebrate birthdays at our centre. We have a birthday cake and with our help the children make party hats and decorate the tables.*

The celebration of birthdays raises many vexing questions, and there are no easy answers. It is important that staff in early childhood settings consider how they celebrate for each child and what those celebrations mean for the other children. First, families need to be consulted.

Some families like to select a few children and issue invitations to attend a party at the child's home.

Photo Joanna Jenkaus

Celebrating...birthdays

Some families for religious reasons (for example, Jehovah's Witnesses) may want their children excluded from any birthday celebration.

Some parents who are both in full time paid work may want their children to have their party and cake and candles at the centre because if the birthday is not celebrated there then there may be no opportunity for the birthday to be acknowledged at home.

Centre staff may choose to give children a birthday card which the staff and children have made.

Staff may ban parties because of their principle that the centre has a sugar free diet.

The centre and staff and parents need to talk over the issues and come to a compromise that will allow for all children to have their birthdays acknowledged in ways that are acceptable.

...About Fathers'/Mothers' Day

Cameron

> *Each child in our preschool made a card for Fathers' Day and they painted a picture of their father on the card. We also set up a shop and each parent donated a present, wrapped up so you couldn't see what was inside. The children were told to bring $2 to buy a present for their father. This raised money for our preschool.*

The staff of this service may have made some assumptions about the families of the children who attend their preschool - all children have a father who lives with them, or is accessible to them and all families can afford to not only donate a present but can afford to purchase one. This may also apply to mothers and the celebration of Mothers' Day if this service celebrates this day in a similar way.

As Arthur et al. (1993, p.33) point out:

> *Traditionally 'the family' consists of a mother, a father and one or more children. In reality there are many different family structures. Grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins may all make up the child's immediate family and share responsibility of child-rearing as well as or instead of the biological parents.*
>
> *Some children will come from single parent families, some from communal households where a number of adults share the parenting, some will be parented by homosexual couples and some will come from traditional two parent families.*

An added complexity is that many of the 'couples' are separated, divorced, repartnered or remarried and so children have many family relationships.

So should we ignore Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day? No, not if it is raised by the children. The celebration should come from them and not be imposed in a way that means that children receive the message that a 'normal' family is one where there is a father or mother at home as is the case with Cameron and his staff. If for example Helen says, 'My Dad is getting a fishing rod for Father's Day and we're going to the beach for a picnic', it is important to acknowledge with Helen, not the whole group, that this is something that is celebrated in her home.

Staff could also consider traditional material - some new card or paper that children can access to make cards or gifts if they choose to do so - as Patrick talked about doing at Christmas time.

...About Big Events in Children's Lives

Karen

> *The focus of our celebrations is children. It's not difficult to think of things that are important to them and have meaning for them. Children, or a parent will let you know what's worth a celebration - and celebrations don't equal parties for us - there are other ways of celebrating.*

What Are Some of the Celebrations of Childhood?

Losing a tooth - The loss of the first tooth means a gap for another, a step towards greater maturity - and tingling excitement! When Tuyet's molar came out she was at her mother's workplace. Tuyet, tooth in hand, walked around the office showing her now isolated tooth (with some chocolate still on it) and getting enthusiastic responses from all the adults: 'Oh Tuyet is the new tooth coming through yet?'; 'It's a bit messy but it's not worrying you is it?' Tuyet felt very good. Tuyet was six. So, when Tuyet arrives at school and then outside school hours care next day how might the lost tooth be celebrated?

Success with a skill - David learned to 'post' balls into a shute. The delight on his face and the claps given by the staff indicated that this was worthy of a celebration. All day the celebration went on. David felt so good that he clapped too. David was fifteen months old and had Down's Syndrome. The staff were eager to make sure that David's family knew to celebrate his newly acquired skill.

Having grandparents come to stay - Jessica was two and a half when her grandfather visited. At first Jessica watched her grandfather from across the room. It was a long time since they had last met (six months) and Jessica noticed the white hair and white moustache. Jessica's parents and grandfather talked and had a cup of tea.

Celebrating...grandparents coming to stay

After a while Jessica went to her room and got her favourite book *I'm Going on a Bear Hunt* and went back to where her parents and grandfather were and she quitely climbed up onto her grandfather's knee. Grandfather acknowledged Jessica with a squeeze and then read the book. Jessica felt so good having a 'grandpa' come to stay and that night she was too excited to go to bed!

Jessica's grandfather took her to family day care the next day. Grandfather was invited to stay and was introduced to the other children and told how exciting it was for Jessica having him at her home.

The wonder of nature - A group of five year olds were spellbound by the beauty of bubbles and the adult encouraged their wonder by pointing out how the smaller bubbles held their round shape, how bigger ones were changed by the breeze and how there were rainbows of colour in the surface of the bubbles. At first the children watched and watched. Later they became very excited and chased the bubbles and played trying to burst them.

The magic and the wonder of the bubbles made the children feel very elated and was cause for celebration.

Sponsoring a child - Hilary and her family were delighted. They had received a letter and information about the child from Ghana who they had asked to sponsor. Araba was four years old, the same as Hilary. Araba's grandmother was struggling to care for Araba and her five brothers and sisters. Hilary's family had sponsored Araba because they wanted Hilary and her younger sister to know that not all children had access to all the things that they might take for granted. That evening the family celebrated that Araba was now part of their family too. They read the letter together and looked up Ghana on the world map.

When Hilary next attends preschool how might her special event be acknowledged?

Child Centred Celebrations

They are celebrations of simplicity and significance.

They need not involve large groups.

They need not involve elaborate preparation and expense.

They are significant moments in a child's life, or day which are deserving of some acknowledgement.

The children's celebrations discussed here have to do with children, children's growth and children's understandings. The form these celebrations take is different from the way society has made us think about celebrations with ideas about decorations, special food, gifts, and large groups.

While some traditional celebrations may be important and, if done well, may be a valuable part of early childhood services' programs it is essential to think about ways in which you can make celebrations for children more age appropriate, more meaningful and more to do with their everyday lives.

Decisions about celebrations need to be based on knowledge of child development and the events of childhood that excite children in a way that thrills and inspires and helps children to know who they are and to feel good about themselves.

Celebrations need not involve the whole group, instead the events of individual children's lives can become cause for celebration with that child and her/his friends, as we:

sing a song

write children's words

take a photo

give a cuddle

put a message on the celebrations notice board.

Dimitrios has learned to swing. The staff member gathers together Dimitrios' two best friends and takes them to watch Dimitrios. 'Just look, he's got the idea how to tuck his legs in and then push back. He can go higher and higher. Hi! Dimitrios we are amazed you really can swing high now. That's great! Does it feel good? Can you see us down here?'

Later the teacher put a sign on a celebrations notice board.

Today Dimitrios learned to swing!

That afternoon Dimitrios came to the teacher with a drawing he had done and said: 'This is picture of me on the swing. Can I pin it on the board near the sign about me?'

This is one example of how the idea of celebrations, other than traditional celebrations, might be introduced to children. You might think about establishing a notice board but you might also consider beginning

...by using pictures and props to share an experience from your own family. Choose an event that isn't a recognised holiday - perhaps a graduation or a relative coming to visit - to help the children understand that these are

Photo Rhonda Milner

Celebrating...jumping

celebrations, too. You might talk about how you and your family bustled about to clean up the house, cooked special foods, and invited people over for a party.
(Church, 1992, p.46)

Who is in Charge of These Celebrations?

...It's the week before Christmas...

1. ...and you are with two friends in the block area where you have created a block city. You've made roads, sky-scrapers, houses, parks, and traffic lights. It has taken the three of you at least thirty minutes and it is not complete yet. The teacher calls from the centre of the room for the third time: 'You children come straight over here. You are the only ones who have not made a Santa decoration for the tree'. You run to the table where the teacher and several other children are cutting and pasting. With the materials available you each hastily put together the required Santa. Thinking you have finished you rush back to the blocks only to be recalled by the teacher who is not satisfied with your efforts, and insists that you improve your Santa by re-doing the cotton-wool. While you do that you keep an eye on the block area because several of the younger children have gone in there and they are having great time knocking down the tallest of the buildings. By the time the teacher dismisses you from the Santa table the block city is in ruin. You had no enjoyment from the Santa activity and now the blocks are spoilt, so you and your friends run outdoors yelling 'Cowbunga' at the top of your voices.

2. ...and you are a four year old who attends an early childhood service which prides itself on having a child centred program. One day you are with two friends in the block area where you have created a block city. You've made roads, sky-scrapers, houses, parks, and traffic lights. You tell the teacher that last week-end you and your family had decorated the house ready for Christmas. You ask the teacher for suggestions of how you might decorate some of the block houses. The teacher suggests that you look on the collage trolley where there are some recent additions of tinsel, gold and silver foil, red and green paper and other interesting materials that could be used for decorating.

Conclusion

It is time for early childhood educators to step back and look at what celebrations mean. It is time to ask 'What events have meaning in our lives?'; 'What aspects of celebrating are important?'

For each of us the answers will be different, and so it is with children.

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Photo Rhonda Miller

Celebrating...the weather

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• AECA Newsletter

There will be six issues of the newsletter in 1994. The newsletter is produced by National Office staff and is a way of keeping the field informed of developments and issues as they occur. Over recent years particular attention has been paid to political events and government policy changes. With so much happening it is likely that 1994 issues will continue this focus.

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Guidelines for Contributors -1994

1. **Length of manuscripts**
   Journal articles — 2 500 words. Longer articles of special merit may be considered; however, these should be discussed with the publications staff in advance.
   Resource Book Series — up to 22 A4 typed pages (double spaced). Any illustrations provided will be considered. Please discuss with publications staff in advance.
   EC Special Titles — to be discussed well in advance with National Director and / or Publications Manager
   Magazine articles —Features: 1500 words, regulars: 750 words, illustrations welcome (B&W photographs or line art)
2. **Form of submission**
- Material should be submitted to AECA on floppy disk whenever possible. Both three and a half and five and a quarter inch disks are acceptable. Any currently available software can be used - please indicate the name when submitting your material. Please provide at least one hard copy of the material with the disk. Call the publications section first if you have questions.
- Typed manuscripts are acceptable. They should be unformatted and double spaced. Indication should be clearly given for the placement of tables, graphs or charts. Tables should be made up using single tabs only - no hard (space bar) spaces, lines or borders are necessary.
- Please mark headings, sub headings and paragraphs clearly. For example:
  This is a Page or Article Heading
  (first letter of each word only is a capital)
  This is a sub heading or side heading
  (first letter of line only is a capital, the rest are lower case)
- A cover sheet should show details of author, affiliations and contact details (author's name and details should appear ONLY on cover sheet for review purposes)
- The body of the article should be prefaced by a short (100-150 word) abstract.

3. Style
   AECA prefers to use non-stereotypical language and situations in its publications, i.e. authors should avoid the use of sexist, ageist or racist terminology. For example, don't use fireman when you could use firefighter.
- Don't use generic 'mother' when discussing children's care when you could use either parent or carer.
- Avoid the generic HE; use she/he or he/she when writing about individuals.
- The use of metric measurement is preferred.
- We use the Macquarie Dictionary as a guide for hyphenated words.

4. **Using numbers in figures**
   As a general rule, figures rather than words should be used for

sums of money	$5.08 or 25c, $2 000 (no commas in thousands)
times of day	10.30 a.m., 50 min, 0830 hours, 11 o'clock
mass	250 t, 120 kg, 50 g
measures	56 litres, 26 km, 16 mm, 25 cm
degrees (inclination)	angle of 45 degrees or 45°
degrees (temp.)	35 degrees or 35°
latitude & longitude	17°58'N 76°48'W
percentages	9 per cent or 9%
ages	60 years old, eight years old

   numbers in narrative, it is better to use words than figures, e.g. there were twenty-three children in the playground; *but*, 1 father had three children with him OR one father had 3 children with him.
5. **References** (please keep to a minimum)
   Academic referencing (Harvard, see American Psychological Association Publications Manual (3rd Edition)) is preferred for Journal and Resource Book articles. In the body of the article, reference should be made only to the work and the year of publication (Johnson, B. & Johnson, M., 1992) unless a direct quote is cited, in which case a page number is added (Johnson, B. & Johnson, M., 1992. p.139). Please aim to type your reference list at the end of the article in the following format:

From a book
Fleet, A. & Clyde, M. (1993) *What's in a day? Working in Early Childhood*. Sydney: Social Science Press

From a journal
Scott, I. (1992) Home injury to children, *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. 17 (3), 18-24.

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   These are to be avoided wherever possible.
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  For further details, please refer to the Australian Style Manual or call AECA Publications section.

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All correspondence and queries should be directed to:
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Thank you.

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